

Gift Of Groceries

Story by Bonnie Powell



Very Much Appreciated

AS reserve-component soldiers continue to be activated in support of the war on terrorism, their families can be affected financially as well as emotionally. And if the soldier has had to leave a higher-paying civilian job, the economic hardship can be long term.

Americans demonstrated great support for U.S. service members during the Gulf War, and increasingly, U.S. military officials said, Americans are looking for ways to support soldiers who are currently deployed to the Persian Gulf region and around the world.

Now Americans can choose a new option among the many acts of kindness they demonstrated earlier. They can donate groceries.

For more than 135 years, military families have been able to put commissary shopping on the top of their lists of most-valued military benefits. But for the first time, the average American can help military families with the "Gift of Groceries," a gift certificate program that allows anyone

to purchase commissary gift certificates through **www.commissaries.com** or by calling a toll-free number, (877) 770-4438.

The certificates can be donated to military families through charitable organizations or given directly to military friends and family, but only authorized shoppers can spend them at any of the nearly 280 commissaries serving the U.S. armed services worldwide.

"Commissaries can save shoppers an average of 30 percent, so it's a valuable benefit for members of our armed forces, their families and retirees," said the Defense Commissary Agency's director, Air Force Maj. Gen. Michael P. Wiedemer.

"The gift-certificate program started as a customer service, but it seems to be evolving into much more," he said. Since the program began in the fall of 2002, such worldwide charities as the Air Force Aid Society, the USO and Fisher House Foundation have agreed to accept donated certificates for military

families in need.

Military chaplains' funds purchased more than \$500,000 for the Christmas and New Year holidays, but now civilian organizations that want to help are getting involved, too.

"We want to support military families through Operation Home Front," said Linda Jo Reynolds, assistant to Pastor Leo Giovinetti at Mission Valley Christian Fellowship. Operation Home front is an effort to support military families in and near San Diego, Calif. Radio station KOGO and Cinchouse, a local nonprofit organization of military spouses, are spearheading Operation Home front.

"We heard they were accepting grocery certificates," said Reynolds. "So we thought, since it was for the military, why not donate commissary gift certificates?" The fellowship donation was \$25,000.

"You would need about \$35,000 to purchase an equivalent amount of groceries at a regular grocery store," said DeCA Deputy Director Patrick B. Nixon. "That kind of additional purchasing power is what the commissary benefit is all about for military families."

The Fisher House Foundation,

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which was recently added to the list of major charities that accept donated certificates, operates 31 “homes away from home” to accommodate family members tending to hospitalized loved ones at major military medical facilities worldwide. Each Fisher House has a large, modern kitchen and space to store groceries.

“Families often face additional, unexpected expenses when a relative is hospitalized,” said foundation Vice Chairman Ken Fisher. “Being able to provide them with commissary gift certificates will provide some stress relief, enabling them to focus more of their attention on their loved one.”


The gift-certificate program is made possible through a business agreement with CertifiChecks Inc., at no cost to DeCA or the federal government. A standard charge covers the costs of handling,

printing and mailing of up to 20 certificates — as long as all are going to the same address. Additional charges may apply for bulk orders or special delivery. When a purchaser elects to donate, CertifiChecks sends the donated certificate to the designated charity.

“The donation of commissary gift certificates to military families has been tremendous so far,” said Mike Baskerville, vice president of

CertifiChecks Inc. “Giving the gift of groceries has been embraced by the public and business worlds alike as a wonderful way to support American men and women in uniform.”


DeCA operates a worldwide chain of nearly 280 commissaries, providing groceries to military personnel, retirees and their families. Authorized patrons purchase items at cost plus a 5-percent surcharge, which covers the costs of building new commissaries and modernizing existing ones. Shoppers save an average of more than 30 percent on their purchases, compared to commercial prices — savings worth more than \$2,400 annually for a family of four.

A core military family support element, and a valued part of military pay and benefits, commissaries contribute to family readiness, enhance the quality of life for America’s military and their families, and help recruit and retain the best and brightest men and women to serve their country, said Wiedemer. 



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